

## A ray of hope in the murky situation

Why not build up on it?

**T**WO signs of maturity are readable into the recent spate of political developments: first, Jatiya Chhatra Dal (JCD)'s pull-back from their Shudha Bhaban siege programme on April 21 at the instructions of prime minister Khaleda Zia; secondly, opposition has not given a call for hartal on the back of latest incidents.

The first move by the ruling party has definitely headed off an imminent showdown with the opposition which had previously scheduled a siege around Hawa Bhaban for the same day. And the latter decision of the opposition not to instantaneously go for hartal in spite of the reckless arrests of their activists and other forms of police highhandedness centring around the Hawa Bhaban siege programme reflected a healthy use of alternative options for political protestation.

We should not overlook the maturity signals because these are laced with premonitions of a political catastrophe given rise to by the spurts of unmitigated political brinkmanship. Nor should we feel overwhelmed by the speed of events. On the contrary, the ruling party and the opposition must take a pause, and build up on those two maturing signs thereby helping to expand the cycle of positive attitudes from what are mere dots now.

But, at the same time, we cannot but feel distraught of the highhandedness shown by the government to crush the opposition dissent. Its indiscriminate picking up of youngsters from train, launch and bus stations, arrests of opposition activists and foiling of their demonstration programmes at the points of origin, have had two fall-outs. One, we think the government is sealing off all avenues for the opposition to assemble, hold rallies and put their points across to the people. Toppling the government is an unsupportable agenda, but there should be no physical threat perception overkill on the part of the government where the opposition is left with no space to operate. We feel that the closing down of outlets for the opposition might lead them to go back on the hartal course which we dread so much. Need we repeat that The Daily Star is avowedly opposed to hartal?

Secondly, we don't also understand the government's recourse to reckless arrests which is touching the nerves of ordinary citizens. Why should the government court adverse public opinion when it can help it?

The bottomline, therefore, is this: the faint silver-line around the cloud that the JCD's withdrawal from a bellicose programme on April 21 and opposition's eschewal of impulsive hartal represented must be developed into a cycle of positive engagement between the two sides.

## Mindless arrests

Let these be stopped

**T**HE indiscriminate and mindless arrests of thousands of people have raised some serious questions in the public mind regarding the motive of the government. Unsuspecting and innocent young men are being picked up by police from railway stations, bus stands and all such places. The extent of the shock and trauma that the victims' families are subjected to is not hard to guess, as the young men are disappearing without notice. The hardship of the arrested people knows no bounds since they do not know when the ordeal would come to an end, nor are they aware of the sin for which they are being punished. All this is done in the name of resisting the opposition's oust-the-government agenda.

Most of the picked up young men are from poor families. Their parents and relatives have thronged the police stations and courts in the last few days to get them released. This has spawned a degree of corruption, let alone causing unbearable hardship to the ordinary people.

There is a High Court ruling that the law enforcers should be judicious in the application of Section 54, meaning that they should much rather err on the side of caution. That amply reflects judicial concern over the use of Section 54. Then it has been ruled that the law enforcers should produce the arrestees before court within 24 hours and make sure that their parents and relatives have been informed of the arrest as soon as possible, but not later than within the same time period.

It has been reported that nearly 40 percent of the thousands of arrestees have been released. That highlights the arbitrary nature of the operation.

There is no doubt that such a crackdown amounts to a gross violation of human rights. It is an ill-advised counter offensive in the face of the opposition movement that can only bring bad name to the government. We are hoping the government will see fit to stop the mass arrest campaign.

## Making of the new European quilt

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

**S**OMEHOW the people of the Orient have an obscurantist view of events unfolding in Europe, the latest being the formal expansion of NATO and its impact on Russian security and thereby on global peace and development. The distant perception of the Orient of the continued existence of NATO and the furtherance of its physical boundary are not easily understood. Edward Said spoke not only of the physical proximity of the Orient with Europe resulting in its becoming Europe's greatest, richest and oldest colonies but Orient also being the source of European civilisations and languages, its cultural constant helping Europe to define its contrasting image and personality. Said saw the relationship between the Occident and the Orient as one of power, of domination and of varying degrees of complex hegemony. Added to this almost incestuous relationship furthered by Western efforts to construct the "Global Village" despite the digital divide between the East and the West, Eastern refusal to be cognisant of the revolutionary developments in Europe may not serve its long term interests.

To some it is perceived as a civilisational clash between Western Christianity and Russian Orthodox Christianity, a continuance of the old ideological conflict while to many this ostrich like refusal to view the current developments as a reflection of their inability to influence the course of events caused by the greatest contraction of power and influence in modern history due to the demise of the Soviet Union coupled with the emergence of the unchallenged and unrivalled US imperium since the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Thus after the fall of the Berlin Wall for over two decades the US enjoyed the "unipolar moment" as it bestrode the globe like a colossus unquestioned by any power in the world.

But the events of nine-eleven at the dawn of the new century broke the spell of invincibility when the US realised that the vanquishing of its traditional rival for over half a century did not guarantee its impregnability before the attack by non-state actor then hosted by one of the poorest third world countries. As Henry Kissinger put it "It is a war (war on terror) that has no front lines. It is a war that had no issues on September 10th. Until then the American public would have been astonished to hear that there were fundamental differences between the United States and Islam or that there was such a concept as a war of civilisations". Kissinger's assertions obviously contradict the prolific writings of historian Bernard Lewis whose thesis of the long fight between Islam and Christianity from the birth of the former earned him distinction in the West.

But then American insularity is also easily understood because of its recent birth as an independent nation freed from British colonialism albeit with the profound distinction from other freedom movements in that the American independence was not a result of fight by the natives against the coloniser but by the settlers against the oppressive rule by their own kind. In that sense American war of independence is separated from all other freedom movements which shook the post-Second World War global society.

It is interesting to note Americans' firm conviction that but for US involvement in the two great wars of the last century the entire free world and multitude of subalterns would have been enslaved by the axis powers and therefore American military and economic powers endow the US with indispensability for the maintenance of peace and stability in the world. Therefore the 'arrogance' displayed by the Littlepuppets - the al-Qaida and the Taliban (albeit morally indefensible and mounted in the name of a hybrid and totally wrong interpretation of a great religion) was an intolerable affront to the uncrowned king of the modern world. So the doctrine of pre-emption to attack an adversary not based on imminent threat but on plausible threat of attack lacking moral clarity and causing irreparable damage to international law and transatlantic alliance became the bed rock of Bush administration's foreign and defence policy. The US began to see the transatlantic alliance through the prism of Robert Kagan which perceived that the "real division of labour consisted of the US making the dinner and Europeans doing the political position in Europe".

Formally nothing stands in the way of deploying weapons and troops in the Baltic countries since they are not signatories to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty - Russian request dismissed by the West on the ground of Russian failure to remove its bases from Georgia and Moldova. The US refuses to recognise the fact that Russian consent to stationing American aviation in Central Asian countries is to fight terrorism which does not warrant deployment of NATO infrastructure in Poland and Baltic countries. It would be prudent for the West to construct a new security system embracing Russia instead of waiting to see if Russian democracy is growing following Western model. Henry Kissinger is strongly opposed to bringing Russia into the fold of Western security arrangement on the ground that it will sow confusion in NATO, lead to bureaucratisation of the process, and to weakening of the prospect of eventual reconciliation with Russia.

The Western argument of NATO's expansion as provided in the Prague Summit Declaration (21.11.04) and the Chairman's statement following the informal meeting of NATO-Russia Council (2.04.04) should adequately reassure Russia of her security interests being guarded does not appear to be convincing as one of the reasons behind the creation of NATO was the perception of the Western leaders that UN security system was not adequate to protect and defend, as seen by John Foster Dulles, "our cherished freedom", religious faith, and western political and social system as counter attraction to communism. Fortunately for the world President Vladimir Putin (as opposed to muscle flexing President Bush) is likely to find a synthesis

Bob Woodward's forthcoming book on plan to attack Iraq narrates the extreme secrecy maintained at the initial stage of planning to the extent that both National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and CIA Director George Tenet were kept out of the loop let alone taking into confidence Bush's closest ally Tony Blair. The reason for this extreme secrecy was because President Bush wanted to avoid "enormous international angst and domestic speculation" at a time when the US was

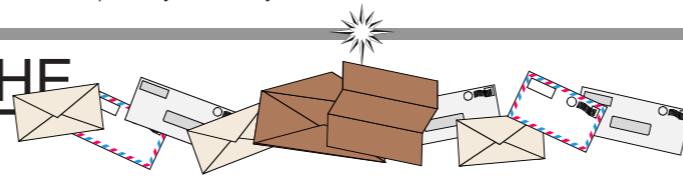
media coverage to defend the rights of the citizens. The lust for a vile life is rampant in metropolis Dhaka, enjoying a stunted growth for more than 30 years. The lunatic asylum laws need to be updated, for more catch in the net.

We are a retarded nation, and the upper class is hostage to the political *banias*, Shoodh (interest on financial capital) and commissions (and omissions) rule the day. We apparently have no faith in justice. The matter of the moment counts. Many have lost interest in politics. The empty galleries during the Indo-Pak recent cricket matches (DS, April 16) is a similar symptom represented in other countries, political devils control crores of taka through betting

the basics of human conduct.

The political leaders are vociferous in their attempts to portray the nation in different lights. But these enlightened leaders (who carry dead weights as shackles) miss the basics of human conduct.

Politics is a *jharrow* (broom) for cleaning up or beating. In this amphitheatre of the gladiators, innocent masses are not allowed to participate, regardless of the



## Will supermarkets in Bangladesh be super for small farmers?

AMM SHAWKAT ALI

INTERNATIONAL Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) last December looked at the above issue (IFPRI, Forum, December 2003). It noted that booming market for supermarkets has been Latin America. According to an expert, supermarkets in Latin America achieved a rate of diffusion in one decade that took five decades in the United States. It is said that East and Southeast Asia are about five years behind Latin America. In India, the growth of supermarkets is on the rise but the pace is slower than elsewhere. The slower pace is due to a "policy environment that does not permit foreign direct investment in retail chain."

### Multinational vs national supermarket chains

It may be useful to make a distinction between multinational and national supermarket chains. In India, the chain is largely national for reasons already stated. Whether national or multinational, the chain provides an one-stop service to consumers. The people of the countries in the developing world have long been used to a typical shopping day at an outdoor market to buy fresh fish, meat, vegetables and fruits. Such markets in the urban areas also include shops for buying rice, cooking oil and other daily necessities such as spices. In the rural markets that is also more or less the case.

### Bangladesh case

Bangladesh scenario has been changing fast at least in the urban areas since the 1990's. The rural areas remain more or less unchanged. It is dominated by what is known as *Hats* that are seen to operate once a week. However, in prosperous locations, in the district and Upazila centres, there are fixed market places.

The rural market centres provide the supply chain to the urban areas working through Beparis, Aratdars and Wholesalers. It is said that these intermediaries reap more benefit in terms of profit than the poor farmers who sell their products. This system has not changed at least in respect of food items such as rice, wheat, chilies, vegetables and fruits.

However, a distinctive change has taken place in respect of poultry birds. The broilers and layers are in abundance. The growth has been remarkable since the nineties. The supply chain includes both small and big farmers and the product is almost wholly consumed in the urban markets. Milk is another product. But it has not increased on the same scale as poultry.

The growth of supermarkets for food and related items cannot be said to be remarkable in Bangladesh. In Dhaka city, however, the fastest growth has been, not in supermarkets, but in fast food shops and restaurants of various sizes. Twenty years back, one could count Chinese restaurants by the finger. Now one can see all types of restaurants, Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Korean and what not. The number of restaurants serving only Bangladeshi food has also increased.

In the late nineties and early 2000, a few supermarkets have sprung up in Dhaka. Foremost among them are Agora, Meenabazar and Nandan. They can be called big departmental shops or mini supermarkets. But they also provide retailing of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and fishes. Such markets are located only in Dhanmondi and Gulshan areas. Generally, people in higher income bracket are the customers.

### How does it help small farmers?

There are negative views on the above issue. First, the growth of supermarkets poses serious risks for the developing country farmers, who have traditionally supplied the local street markets. Second, the growth of supermarkets is good news for big farmers and efficient well-organized farmers. For others

it can be troublesome. There is also the opposite view. The new trend offer opportunities as well as threats which should be faced.

### Creating opportunity for small farmers

For small farmers, it is difficult to get into the procurement system of supermarkets. This is because entry into the system will require investment in irrigation, greenhouses, trucks, cooling sheds and packing technologies among other things. Supermarkets will insist on grading, quality control, uninterrupted and timely delivery. There is need to assist farmers in these and other related areas so that they may get full advantage of the opportunity created by supermarkets. One of the ways to provide the linkage between small farmers and the supermarket is to establish what is known as contract growing system.

sector food industry and our exporters may need a nudge to engage in partnership with small farmers. In Bangladesh, development policies and strategies often neglect this new reality, although it cannot be said that such areas have been totally overlooked. In fact, the partnership approach, other than the examples already cited, was actively promoted under Agrobased Industries and Technology Development Project (ATDP) funded by the government and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) during the mid-nineties. By all accounts, it was a successful project that initiated commercialization of both crop and non-crop agriculture involving small farmers and the supermarket is to establish what is known as contract growing system.

Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation has been pioneer in developing the system.

However, it was limited to quality seeds only. The private sector food industry in Bangladesh can also follow the contract growing system. One such industry is said to have been doing this in respect of production of pineapples, tomato and baby corn. But this is for canned products. At the other end are the vegetable exporters. Hortex Foundation during the late nineties took the initiative of establishing contract growing system for production of French beans, which are exported. But the system is yet to gain wider acceptance.

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### Facing up to the new reality of food retailing

Admittedly, Bangladesh is not where other developing countries are, in respect of the growth of supermarkets, involved in food retailing. This need not blind us to the fact that supermarkets, private

EU in the same manner brought in a team of consultants on the subject at about the same time.

There is yet no initiative for a project.

ADB is understood to have taken initiative for Project Preparatory Technical Assistance (PPTA) about a year back on this subject. One is yet to see anything visible.

These then are the facts. Yet

the very same institutions show

great interest in launching mega

projects in the name of poverty

alleviation without coming to

terms with the new reality of food

retailing that may benefit our

small farmers. There is perhaps

need to make a fair assessment of

the opportunities and challenges

that lie in the new reality. As

aptly put by IFPRI "Given the proper

information, training, and infra-

structure, millions of small farmers in Africa, Asia, and Latin Amer-

ica may find farming more profit-

able than ever" they may be

forced out of farming altogether.

It is upto the policy makers and

the development partners who

influence policy to choose

whether to leave the small farm-

ers in the sidelit or to bring them

into limelight.

AMM Shawkat Ali is a former Agriculture Secretary

**TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR**

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Fake examinees!

Recently, 13 'fake' examinees were caught at JU. This is nothing new. In this country, it has become a regular practice. How disgraceful!

During the admission tests of DU, I witnessed that many good students were involved in this illegal act. I believe such acts should be discouraged and good students should stop sitting for examinations on behalf of others. Everyone must get the chance to prove her/his ability, only if she/he has that ability!

**Md. Ariful Islam**

RUET

**The state of the**

### nation

The state of the nation can be judged from the stark reality of a three-year old baby being challenged and taken to the court on an alleged murder charge! The law minister has rightly asked for the suspension of the police official concerned (DS April 16).

The political leaders are vociferous in their attempts to portray the nation in different lights. But these enlightened leaders (who carry dead weights as shackles) miss the basics of human conduct.

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